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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the process of soliciting evaluation feedback from nonresident students in the Army Management Staff College (Virginia) program on leadership and management for civilian employees of the Army has evolved since 1995. Course design is briefly described, including the use of video-teleconferences, chat rooms, an electronic bulletin board and library, and e-mail. Discussion of the evaluation plan covers administration and response nonresident class surveys from 1995 through 1998, graduate surveys, and supervisor surveys. The analysis and electronic dissemination of survey data to staff and faculty is also summarized. (AEF)

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Cyber-Evaluation: Evaluating a Distance Learning Program

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Introduction

The Army Management Staff College offers a resident course in leadership and management for civilian employees of the Army. The course is designed to provide senior civilian leaders with the skills, knowledge and understanding of the "Big Picture" required to make critical decisions in the workplace of today and prepare them for senior level positions within the Department of the Army or other government agencies. Since 1995 the college has offered a one year nonresident version of the program. Since the inception, determining how best to solicit evaluation feedback from the students has been a challenge. This paper will examine how the process has evolved since 1995.

Course Design

Students are divided into 5 seminars with approximately 16 students and a full-time faculty leader. Seminar members live all over the United States, as well as Korea, Japan, and Europe. Students attend a one-week resident session at the beginning of the program and another one-week session at the conclusion. In between, instruction is primarily paper based. The content is divided into 4 segments with graded assignments required for each segment. There are two video-teleconferences during the year with videos provided to those students unable to attend the sessions. Students have also been provided access to chat rooms, an electronic bulletin board and library, as well as e-mail to supplement the paper materials. Most seminars schedule weekly study sessions in the chat room with logs being posted in the library for those unable to attend.

Evaluation Plan

From the beginning the plan was to evaluate the nonresident program the same as the resident program. Student surveys be administered for at the end of each resident session and periodically throughout the year. In addition, a graduate survey would also be distributed 6 months after graduation and a survey sent to supervisors one year after graduation. One of the advantages of using the same evaluation strategy is the ability to compare data on the graduates of both programs to determine if supervisors and graduates themselves respond differently.

Student Surveys

Nonresident class 95. For NR 95, surveys for the 2 resident sessions were administered using paper and Scantron forms. Surveys were administered at the conclusion of each of the 4 segments of the curriculum. For the first survey, many of the questions were taken from surveys developed for the resident program. However, analysis of the responses showed a definite difference in responses between resident and nonresident students on the same items. In addition, responses that had not been anticipated were needed for some questions.

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An example is the questions on the quality of feedback provided to students on their assignments. While the concept was for faculty in a week or two, this was not happening and many students had not received feedback on all assignments prior to the survey. As a result the questions were modified for the second survey and focused on whether the program was working as planned (i.e., students receiving feedback from one assignment prior to the submission of the next) as well as the quality of the methods, materials, and experience.

Prior to the second survey, students obtained access to the electronic facilities. Therefore, the survey was also available for them to download form the library as well as being mailed to them. They could respond electronically or via mail. The same procedures were used for the third and fourth survey. Only 2 or 3 students opted to submit their results electronically. The fourth survey was due about 2 weeks before the final resident session. The response rate for this survey was only 35%, far lower than any of the other three where response rates ranged from 72% to 58%.

Nonresident class 96. Surveys were again administered for each of the resident sessions using paper and Scantron forms. The number of surveys administered while the students were off-site was reduced from four to three. Because of the low response rate for the final survey of NR 95, the decision was made to include questions on the final segment of the curriculum completed off-site in the survey for the second resident session. In addition, the survey administration changed from paper-based to disk. Each student was mailed a disk with the survey on it. They completed the survey and mailed it back in a post-paid disk mailer. While the return rates using this method were comparable to the paper-based surveys of NR 95, there were problems. The only software available that could handle open-ended responses was DOS based while most students were more comfortable with a Windows environment. In addition, one student had a Macintosh that the software would not run on. This problem was resolved by mailing a paper copy to the one student. During each administration, a number of diskettes were damaged during mailing. While 99% of the data was recovered, the process was time-consuming.

Nonresident class 97. Again, the resident session surveys were administered using paper and Scantron forms. However, the three off-site surveys were administered via the World Wide Web. The surveys were attached to the AMSC web site but could only be accessed with the URL. Once the survey was in place, each student was sent an e-mail with the URL address and the date when the survey would no longer be available. The responses were fed into a database that could then be entered into statistics software for analysis. However, return rates using the web are lower than for the other methods with the exception of the fourth survey. For the fourth and fifth surveys a competition was implemented between seminars with the results posted periodically during prior to the due date (Table 1).

Student response to the competition was very positive and the concept will be continued for the next nonresident program. During the administration period for the second survey, there were problems with Internet access to Fort Belvoir. As a result, the AMSC server was down for several days. Once the connection was restored, problems continued with sporadic interruptions of service for several days. In an effort to determine why responses rates were so low for the early surveys, questions on the web survey were added to the final survey. Unfortunately the responses provided little explanation. Most, 71%, of the students said they

had no problems accessing the survey at the web site and there were few recommendations for improving the process.

Table 1. Return Rates for Student Survey

	NR 95		NR 96		NR 97	
	Method	Return	Method	Return	Method	Return
Survey 1 (Resident Session)	Paper	92%	Paper	92%	Paper	92%
Survey 2	Paper	72%	Disk	71%	Web	51%
Survey 3	Paper	64%	Disk	65%	Web	52%
Survey 4	Paper	58%	Disk	59%	Web	70%
Survey 5	Paper	35%	Combined with 6		Combined with 6	
Survey 6 (Resident Session)	Paper	91%	Paper	96%	Paper	99%

Nonresident class 98. Resident sessions will again be paper based and the web will continue to be the primary method of administration. However, students who can not easily access the web or are not comfortable using this method will have the option of completing the survey via e-mail. Software has been purchased that allows for the development of a survey to be delivered via web or e-mail and consolidation of results from both methods into a single database. In addition to adding e-mail capabilities, it eliminates the requirement for a programmer to be involved in the process.

Graduate Surveys

Graduates of the first two nonresident programs were surveyed 6 months after graduation the same as graduates of the resident course. The timeframe for administering graduate surveys is being changed for classes graduating in 1998. Surveys will be administered for both resident and nonresident program graduates in September 1999. Because of the nature of the program, graduates continue to receive surveys periodically after the initial graduate survey at 3 to 5 year intervals.

The questions dealing with the usefulness of the topics taught in the course and perceptions of how well AMSC has prepared them for the workplace were the same as those administered to resident course graduates. Questions dealing with the design and focus of the course were modified to reflect the differences in the delivery of the courses. However, the final result is six questions were removed for the nonresident graduates and three new ones added.

In general, while the responses from the nonresident graduates in NR 95 and NR 96 are positive, they are lower than those from resident course students. This is especially true for

items dealing with how well the course prepared them to think critically and make decisions, two areas that are difficult to replicate in the nonresident environment.

Supervisor Surveys

Like the resident course, the supervisors of nonresident graduates are surveyed one year after graduation. Supervisors are asked to evaluate the knowledge of the graduate on subjects taught in the curriculum as well as the potential of the graduate for senior level positions. The questions are exactly the same as those used for the resident program.

The results for almost all items are higher from supervisors of nonresident graduates. Only one item, which deals with the graduate's ability to manage change, was rated lower for the nonresident class (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of Supervisor Responses

Survey Item: The graduate understands how the organization manages change.				
	95-3	96-1	96-2	NR95
Strongly Agree/Agree	83%	82%	96%	75%

Results

A report is prepared for each survey administered. Copies are distributed electronically to the Dean of Academics, Commandant, and Department Chairs. In addition, a copy is placed on the LAN where it is accessible to all staff and faculty. Course developers and college management has been encouraged not to react to the responses from a single survey. Instead they should look for trends across classes and this type of information is contained in the report when appropriate. In addition, responses from the various sources are compared. The graduate surveys are compared to the results of the student surveys for the class. Results from Nonresident surveys are compared to the comparable resident group. Results from supervisors are compared to those of the graduates on similar items. By looking at similarities and differences between multiple sources, a better picture of the effect and impact of each course is available.

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Autobiographical Sketch

Denise L. Henderson is currently the Director of Evaluation at the Army Management Staff College (AMSC). She has 18 years as a training developer at Soldier Support Center, the U.S. Army Engineer School, as well as AMSC. Denise established the Directorate of Evaluation at AMSC and developed the evaluation plan covering all courses conducted by the college.

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